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SUBJECT: TIMOR-LESTE'S NATIONAL PARLIAMENT: A WORK IN PROGRESS

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Summary

[¶](#)1. (SBU) Timor-Leste's National Parliament is still grappling with language issues, low capacity, staffing shortages, and poor communication with voters. It continues to rely heavily on Portuguese-speaking foreign staff financed by the UNDP. Despite this, the four-party government coalition has managed to pass two budgets since its formation last August, and the opposition FRETILIN caucus has participated constructively. Party structures remain rudimentary, both as Parliamentary caucuses and as national organizations. FRETILIN has by far the most effective national structure, and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao's CNRT remains well financed. Smaller parties are looking forward to the allocation of state funding approved as part of the 2008 budget. End summary.

Context: A New Parliamentary Dynamic

[¶](#)2. (U) The defeat of Frente Revolucionaria de Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN) in June 2007 marked a historic turning point in Timorese politics. Although FRETILIN received 29 percent of the vote (21 of 65 seats), President Ramos-Horta invited a coalition of four smaller parties to form a government. While FRETILIN was in power from 2002-05, its majority in Parliament acted as a rubber-stamp for the government. This dynamic has now changed. The government is represented in the legislature by a new and potentially fractious coalition of several parties, while FRETILIN operates as unified and seasoned opposition bloc. Though FRETILIN still claims the Alliance of the Parliamentary Majority (AMP) coalition government is unconstitutional, it engages in constructive debate on daily matters. Since last August, the Parliament has passed a transitional budget for the final quarter of 2007 and a full budget for the calendar year 2008. The Parliament has nine commissions (committees). The concept of constituent services is developing, but to date the only option for a constituent wishing to reach out to an MP is to call the parliamentarian's mobile phone.

A Parliamentary Babel

¶3. (U) One of the most serious difficulties facing the parliament is language. The constitution requires laws to be enacted in both Tetum and Portuguese, but the structure and vocabulary of Tetum make it significantly less precise than Portuguese. As a result, all laws are drafted in Portuguese, and the constitutional requirement for Tetum translations is rarely observed in practice.

¶4. (SBU) Few MPs and less than five percent of the population speak Portuguese. Plenary sessions are conducted in Tetum with a minority speaking in Portuguese or Bahasa Indonesia. After each session, the minutes are transcribed into Portuguese, which most MPs cannot read. This gives rise to misunderstandings about events in previous sessions, laws under consideration, laws already enacted, and questions of constitutional law. MPs told PolOff that legislators who have language deficiencies rely on their colleagues to interpret and explain. Unscrupulous politicians are not above manipulating these dependencies to their own advantage.

¶5. (SBU) Portuguese is not the only language problem. The Minister of Finance and her close circle were trained in Australia, and they prefer to use the English terms learned during their education. The Government submitted its two-inch thick 2008 budget proposal to the Parliament in English only. As it was already two weeks late, MPs were given until the following morning to read it before debate began.

¶6. (SBU) While MPs acknowledge language is a problem, there is little agreement on a solution. Older parliamentarians and those who were educated outside Timor insist that Portuguese is grammatically superior and is an important aspect of national identity. A more widespread view is that the Tetum language should be "strengthened" to allow it fill the role of Portuguese, but PolOff spoke to no one who knew how this could

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be accomplished in practice.

Scant resources

¶7. (U) The National Parliament continues to grapple with shortages of staff, materiel, and financial resources. The 65 MPs currently share six Timorese staffers, who devote of their time to supporting serving the nine parliamentary committees. None of these staffers have legal training. A foreign advisory staff consists of ten Portuguese-speaking UNDP advisors, and one bilateral advisor from Portugal.

¶8. (SBU) The national government does not provide office space or staff for individual MPs. Likewise, parties do not currently receive state funding, either for their parliamentary caucuses or national organizations. Only the National Congress for the Reconstruction of East Timor (CNRT), FRETILIN and National Unity Party (PUN) have offices and staff paid by dues and donations from party members. This will change soon, however. The 2008 budget authorized \$1 million for parties. 30 percent of this will be spread evenly and 70% by proportion to each party in parliament. All parties except the well-funded CNRT want to triple or quadruple this amount next year.

Constituent outreach challenges

¶9. (SBU) As Timor-Leste lacks electricity and phones in many areas, communication with the electorate is a serious problem. MPs rely on the traditional Timorese networks of interpersonal relationships among family, friends, church, and former resistance units. Though citizens in the districts receive information about events taking place in Dili, the distorted version they receive is more akin to the result of playing the

telephone game in primary school.

¶10. (SBU) Although MPs are elected from party lists and do not represent electoral districts per se, they suffer from the lack of information and feedback from constituents. MPs are entitled to a \$50 stipend for travel on committee business and use of one of parliament's four automobiles, but must plan and coordinate the trip themselves. MPs' travel programs rarely involve organized encounters with constituents, and usually consist of ad hoc meetings with personal and political contacts in the area. After completing the travel, MPs are required to deliver a report during the plenary session. The leaders of each party told PolOff that these reports typically contain no substance, instead focusing on road conditions, delays, and vehicle breakdowns.

Party machines developing

¶11. (SBU) The June 2007 elections were a political upheaval. Unexpected losses by FRETILIN and the CNRT in regions where they assumed victory caused alarm and hope across many parties. These unexpected results opened the door for recent training campaigns by NGOs such as International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) to encourage broad party structures. These NGOs are helping parties to establish or redesign their party machines. However, with the 2007 elections over, these organizations are approaching the end of their party development projects, and it is not clear that they have enough time to effect an improvement in the areas of constituent relations and the legislative process.

¶12. (SBU) The opposition parties FRETILIN and PUN have national party structures. Both of these parties have representatives in each of Timor-Leste's twelve districts, and will soon have a representative in each village. FRETILIN and PUN hold biannual congresses and use their district representatives to get out their messages. Both are counting on the new legislation to provide them the funds to pay a nominal salary to district representatives and hire permanent staff in Dili to communicate with them. With this money, FRETILIN hopes to add more programming to its intermittent radio station, and PUN hopes to increase its news pamphlets.

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¶13. (SBU) The governing AMP coalition is more varied. The party of the Prime Minister, CNRT, is well-funded and is able to provide each district representative with a motorcycle, security guard and a cell phone. CNRT led the effort to lower the amount provided to parties from \$3 million to \$1 million. While this party may have the best resources, the various personalities that coalesced around Xanana Gusmao, former guerilla leader and president, are finding it difficult to send a unified message to their districts. Party leadership confided to PolOff that outside of election season, this structure is rarely utilized.

¶14. (SBU) The remaining members of the AMP coalition, Democratic Party (PD) and Social Democratic Party/Social Democratic Association of Timor (PSD/ASDT), have very few resources. PD has organization at the district level but confided to PolOff that while it has volunteer district leaders, their effectiveness is questionable. PSD and ASDT have little to no structure at the national or local level. These small parties are waiting for the party-funding manna that the party leaders hope will be disbursed by late-February. All three told PolOff that opening a permanent office in Dili with two or more staffers is their first priority, and that while they know district level staff is important, that must come later.

¶15. (U) This report was prepared by TDY political officer Chip

Gamble.
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